

A great film director expands the language of film through developing a distinctive storytelling style involving a fresh and dynamic interaction of narrative and form. If one agrees with this definition, it would be difficult to argue that Robert Altman does not deserve a place alongside the great film directors of the past 100 years.

Altman on Altman, David Thompson's third book in this series on film directors, provides a fascinating look at the innovative style of Robert Altman. Thompson questions Altman at length about each of his 30-plus films, including *M*A*S*H* (1970), *Nashville* (1975), *The Player* (1992) and *Gosford Park* (2001). Altman's frank responses offer an entertaining behind-the-scenes look at his struggles and successes, both inside and outside the Hollywood system.

After a fascinating first few chapters about Altman's meandering path to becoming a film director, including stints as an actor, Second World War pilot, writer for industrial films, tattooer of dogs and television producer, Altman details how his organic and improvisational process led to unpredictable results. He professes to make it up as he goes along, using the script only as a blueprint and "something to fall back on". He also credits actors with being the principal artists of any film,

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Short cuts and surprises

claiming: "I don't think that I direct anything, because by the time the film is cast, about 85 per cent of my creative work is finished." This approach is dramatically different from that of Alfred Hitchcock, for example, who storyboarded every shot, rarely deviated from the script, and is reported to have said that actors should be treated like cattle.

Like all great directors, Altman has been far more interested in trying something new than in simply improving on what has been done already. Decades before it became possible through digital re-mastering, he was a pioneer in manipulating the film "look" to complement the dramatic tenor of his stories. When filming *McCabe & Mrs Miller* (1971), Altman "flashed" the film negative — exposing it to light before developing it — giving it an antique look appro-

priate to the rural 1901 setting. And, Altman wryly explains, "by doing it on the negative, the studio wouldn't have any choice but to accept it". He pushed this even further on *The Long Goodbye* (1973), severely post-flashing the film to create the pastel feel of a 1940s postcard: for *M*A*S*H*, he used heavy fog filters to destroy colours and make the film look dirty.

It is obvious that Altman has found the process of film-making far more gratifying than the results. Further, he has been refreshingly uninterested in commercial success, claiming: "If I made a film and everybody liked it, it would be mush, it would be nothing." The results, however, have been extraordinary, and his many irreverent ensemble films in particular have secured him an important place in the history of cinema. Consequently, *Altman on Altman* is fascinating reading not only for film students and fans of Altman's movies, but for anyone who has ever wondered what a film director does. It provides a wonderful insight into the spontaneity of his process. One is left feeling that each of his films is a snapshot of an evolving idea, which, if begun a moment earlier or ended a moment later, would be very different. Different, but no less interesting.

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